

Finding Treasure in the Tradition

Review of

Pre-Benedictine Monasticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 2

By Thomas Merton

Edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell

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Reviewed by **Pascaline Coff, OSB**

Patrick O'Connell presents us with a sacred collection of teaching notes drawn up by the much appreciated Thomas Merton, mystic monk of our own day. The editor offers us an excellent introduction of 59 pages, very well researched, taking into consideration Merton's relevant letters, health situation and journal entries, Merton's own notes and reminders to himself in the margins. The reader is gifted with historical details, e.g. Merton completed these conferences just "five days before leaving for the hermitage" (1). There are three appendices: textual notes; a table of correspondences between lectures and taped conferences (with dates); and suggestions for further reading – other writings by Merton on topics treated in *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism* and other sources on these topics.

Merton's own pre-Gethsemani studies at Columbia and his teaching at St. Bonaventure College accustomed him to doing research into the sources of subjects that he studied or taught. This he brought along to his monastic life with a knowledge of Latin and French enabling him to search out early documents of monasticism and spirituality. As Sidney Griffith notes in his Preface to the volume, Merton had a rare command of ancient and medieval sources "and sets it down in easily communicable, American English" (x). He delighted with excitement over his discoveries of some of the texts which at that time had never been available in English, e.g. the pilgrimage of the nun Aetheria (Egeria), and the spiritual teachings of St. Ammonas. Of Aetheria, Merton wrote, "I love her. . . . This is really a marvelous book, one of the greatest monuments of fourth-century literature" (xxix).

First, Merton outlined his intent for the course he planned to give to the novices and recently professed monks, which was to make his monks aware of recent developments, at least some of the fruits of a few studies, on the background of the *Rule* of St. Benedict, and so to enable them to gain a deeper and more just appreciation and understanding of the *Rule*. He hoped to help them study the *Rule* in the setting of a monastic milieu which "may well have been the milieu in which the *RM* [*Rule of the Master*] was written, namely southern Gaul" (7). But eventually he geared his presentations to the history of monasticism in Egypt and Syria, and never returned to the *RM* as originally intended. As the editor notes, Merton remarked in his journal that he was "utterly ashamed and annoyed that I have never read *The Hist[oria] Monachorum* before. What have I been doing? I have

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been under a kind of delusion that I was living as a monk all these years – and that I knew what the monastic life was and had read a great deal of the traditional source material. I haven't even scratched the surface, and my heart has not been that of a monk" (xxi-xxii) (Jan. 26, 1963 – one week before beginning the course).

The Benedictine *Rule* [*RB*], Merton told his monks, drawing from his in-depth studies, was: not unique, only one among many rules written at beginning of the sixth century; at least a half dozen Western rules were prior to the *RB*; a great amount of the *RB* was taken from earlier Western rules; the *RB* has a character of its own impressed on it by a redaction of great wisdom and experience; the value of the *RB* is primarily a compilation, an eminently practical digest of a body of traditional material, giving all a new form and orientation; material from these sources was necessarily edited out, but study of these is essential for a full understanding of the *RB*; the unique and authentic character of the *RB* goes back to the times of Charlemagne and the Council of Aix (817) and therefore it is wrong to think of *RB* as original and the creation of St. Benedict alone; it is important to study the *RB* in the light of these new perspectives, i.e. fifth-century monastic documents and the spirituality of the monastic centers in France; it is of great value to read the *RM* and contrast it with the *RB* (4-6).

The section of the book of Merton's notes, quotes, questions and reflections on each of the ancient ones studied is divided into two parts: the first focuses on Gallo-Roman Monasticism, Cassian, the *RM*, and background to the *Rule* of Benedict. He introduces the second section, which includes the monasticism of Syria, Persia and Palestine, by telling the reader that "we must go back a little to include what ought to have been treated in the earlier series of conferences [in] Part I" (213). Much of the monk's teaching time in Part I was spent on Pachomius and revealed Merton's desire to mitigate some of the negative criticism around Pachomian cenobitism and this great Egyptian spiritual master's teachings.

A cursory glance over all Merton intended to bring us includes: John Cassian and his monastery and nunnery at Marseilles; the island monastery at Lérins and its offshoot at Arles with St. Caesarius, and other Rules at Arles: St. Aurelian, John of Arles, etc.; other monastic centers in France: the southern Alps, in the Jura and the Auvergne; Oriental Rules (probably abbatial and episcopal synod statutes); the influence of Origen, through Evagrius and Cassian; the monasteries of Nitria, Scete and the Nile Delta; Syrian and Palestinian monasticism, again through Cassian (Merton made a note on these, saying "This influence has not yet been sufficiently studied" [9], and as noted, he does go back and take this up in depth in Series II); St. Basil and Cappodocian asceticism; St. Pachomius and Egyptian cenobitism through Jerome, Rufinus and Cassian (again, Merton jots a note on this: "a very important source" [9]); St. Martin and St. Hilary in Gaul; the monks of Lérins in contact with St. Paulinus of Nola and Italian associates; and finally Julian Pomerius, refugee from Africa possibly bringing some African influence to Lérins.

One wonders if the novices and others at Gethsemani really knew what a unique and invaluable treasure Thomas Merton was offering them in this course, so long before most of the English translations and publications of the above-mentioned sources, so profuse today, were available. Are we any wiser, having such translations on our library shelves? The book is a must for all monastic libraries and a gifted invitation to every living monk to "taste and see," to drink and be inebriated. And since there is a hidden monk in everyone – the book is a must for the monastic library in everyone's heart.